

\mem\jewish.1

Sept 26, 1997

We were Jews, whatever that meant. It meant we were descended from the Jews in the Bible, which seemed like a good thing. But my parents and my sister and I didn't follow the Jewish religion, and their parents, my grandparents, hadn't either. My mother's parents weren't very religious, I was told, and my father's parents were militant atheists.

We were Christians. We were Jews and in religion we were Christians. I never heard the two words put together, Christian Jews or Jewish Christians, but if anyone had ever suggested that that's what we were I think my parents would have agreed without any hesitation. There was never any doubt in our family that both of those terms applied to us.

My mother had become a Christian Scientist before she married, and she converted my father. My father told me that one of her incentives in marrying him, in fact a condition she made for marrying him, was that he would take her away from Denver and her family so she could practice Christian Science without creating tension in her family. They weren't very religious, they went to temple only a few times a year on special occasions, but it upset them to have her become a Christian.

Later my father experienced healings, of eczema on his hands and, he was convinced, in my half-brother's hearing, and he became a Scientist himself. In fact, he became obsessed with it. As they say, it became his religion. He gave up drinking Scotch and smoking cigars and memorized large parts of the Science and Health, along with a lot of the Bible.

It would be fair to call them fanatical Christian Scientists. They read the Science and Health by Mary Baker Eddy every day for an hour or more, and we all went to church every Sunday and almost every Wednesday night to church services at which people gave testimonials to healings and other "demonstrations" of the truth of Christian Science.

I was excused from medical examinations in grade school, and I never saw a doctor till I went to boarding school at twelve. Till about that time, when I stopped going to Sunday school because I had my piano lessons on Sundays when I came home from school, I was a pretty good Scientist myself. I believed in most of the teachings and testimonials, up to a point. But I grew up with the private understanding that if I was ever in really serious health trouble, I would have to find my way to a doctor on my own, though it wasn't obvious to a child just how to do that. I knew my father would let me die rather than let me see a doctor.

My main health problem was headaches. We would often go to

movies, to see Shirley Temple or Greer Garson (who I was in love with) at the big theater in the Fisher Building. We would go to matinees and for some reason there was never time for lunch on those occasions, and I would end up with a headache. Even without that, I would get a bad headache every week or two, not a migraine but a strong, dull pain in my temples that wouldn't go away, along with some nausea. I wasn't allowed to have any aspirin.

[That's a retrospective statement. I didn't have any experience of that as a possibility at the time, though I'd seen ads about such stuff and people outside the family sometimes offered it. Giving in to that suggestion would have had the status in our household of a satanic ritual. Now I'm a Tylenol junkie, after years of gobbling aspirin till it began to hurt my stomach. I take these on principle, religiously you might say, to the dismay of friends in California who suspect and disdain all non-herbal pharmaceuticals. Their attitude has the smell of Christian Science to me. Yes, I do want to regard my body like a machine, that can be fixed up by external, artificial medications without my thinking about it. I don't want to feel responsible for all my ills and for making them go away by the power of mind.]

The only thing that really made me feel better was a cold washcloth on my forehead, especially with some ice in it. I would lie down on my bed in the dark with the shades drawn with my head on the washcloth on the pillow, or on my back with the washrag

filled with ice on my eyes and temples. Water from the ice melting trickled down the sides of my face. The pillow got wet and cold, and that felt good too on my face after the ice had all melted.

But all this had to be hidden from my mother. (It usually took place in the late afternoon, when my father wasn't home). If I heard her coming up the stairs, I had to whip the washcloth off the pillow and hide it under the bed, because it was too much like a medical treatment of pain, it was giving reality to my belief in a headache.

It was all right to lie on my bed, knowing the truth, though it would have been better to be reading the Science and Health. But sometimes she felt the wet pillow and caught me. I had to be secretive in getting the ice out of the refrigerator in the kitchen and smuggling it up the stairs. This went on regularly, for years.

Sometimes with these sick headaches I would throw up, which I had to hide from my father; once or twice he caught me kneeling on the floor of the bathroom with my head resting on the seat and he was enraged and contemptuous. He said I was "on my knees to mortal mind."

Sickness was an illusion, a false belief, because it contradicted the truths that only what was permanent and eternal was real, only states of being that manifested the goodness and the

will of God had reality. All else including sin, sickness and pain presented only an illusion of permanence and reality which could be dispelled, along with their grip on our mind and feelings, by better understanding, by "knowing the truth" of their unreality in the light of God's goodness and ever-presence.

The disappearance of the "belief," the pain or apparent symptoms, demonstrated the truth and the power of Christian Science, it was a "demonstration." (Scientists rejected the notion of "faith-healing." Their watchwords were knowledge, understanding, not faith, and "healing" implied there had been something real to be healed, rather than simply a false belief to be seen through and discarded. "Mortal mind" was the source and sum of false beliefs about reality, the belief that there was substance and intelligence in matter, which was inert and impermanent and had no true reality.

I have a great resistance to reconstructing these doctrines which I spent so much time in my youth hearing from my father, though I find that the terms do come back to me after fifty years of not thinking about them. The point is that there was a coherence to the teachings, which needs illustrating to anyone who has never heard them, most people, to make the practices that followed from them seem other than bizarre. To take medical steps to treat a supposed illness or injury, even to name it aloud, was to "give it reality," to act toward it as something other than an "error," a

false manifestation of mortal mind, and thus to reinforce the false belief in its reality, prolonging the illusion and the experience of pain.

The practical merit of these attitudes and practices is to turn one's attention away from pain or painful emotions and focus it instead on thoughts of goodness and wholeness, which does have a calming and pain-relieving effect. It even has a healing power if you believe in it, probably equivalent to a placebo effect, which is a real though little-understood curative process.

I remember the moment I was chasing a soccer ball in a second-grade homeroom in Detroit and ran my forehead into the flange of an iron radiator next to the wall. I was knocked on my back and blood was streaming down my face from a gash in my left forehead that left a white mark for the next thirty years. The scar stayed visible because my mother, who was called immediately, wouldn't give permission for it to be sewn up, or even bandaged.

After a couple of days the teachers complained that the appearance of the wound was bothering the other children, and my parents permitted them not to "bandage" it but to cover it till it healed with a flat piece of gauze that would hide it from sight.

Twice in playing with my chemistry set, making low-level explosives with sulphur and potassium and magnesium, I created

explosions that burned my one of my hands badly. My hand, my pianist's hand! Why was I using a flame so near magnesium powder, especially a second time? Could I have been willing to risk my precious hands, in the interest of science?

Anyway, I remember the flash the first time, my scream, and my brother rushing out to the porch where I was and then running to the kitchen to get some butter to put on the burn, which my father, who had been reading the paper in the livingroom, forbade him to apply. Instead he had me sit in a chair across from him and repeat after him, over and over, "the scientific statement of being":

"There is no life, truth, intelligence nor substance in matter. All is Infinite Mind, and its infinite manifestation, for God is All-in-all. Spirit is immortal Truth; matter is mortal error. Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness. Therefore man is not material; he is spiritual."

I wasn't supposed to look at my hand while we were saying this, and I couldn't whine about the pain. Before long an impressive blister began to form. It was huge, like a balloon. It was too big to put a bandage on, and again the children at school didn't like to see it.

Mother herself had red, oozing sores on her ankles which I

would have been glad to have her cover up so I didn't have to look at them. She would put her legs up on a chair while she read the Science and Health, and I couldn't keep from noticing them, with horror and fascination. I hated to think she was in pain, and I wished I could do something for her. She said it came from bumping her ankles together, though years later my brother told me it was varicose veins, which could have been operated on. She put gauze pads on them so she could wear stockings, but the blood seeped through.

I didn't know anyone my age who did that when I was growing up and I didn't really know what it involved, beyond reading and believing the Old Testament, like Christians, but still following dietary restrictions and some other rules that Christians had dropped, and not believing in the New Testament and Jesus. And having different holidays.

My parents didn't seem to know any more about the Jewish religion than I did. I don't think my mother had ever been to a synagogue, though she said her older brothers and sisters went perfunctorily on a few occasions a year when they were grown up. My father's parents were both militant atheists, along with being political radicals, anarchists, or my brother told me recently "nihilists."

They had left Russia in part to escape the ghetto, along with

the Tsar's draft which had just started to be applied to Jews, and they weren't interested in living in a ghetto when they came to America. My father told me that his mother had grown up largely on big estates on the border of Poland and Russia that her father had managed for Russian aristocrats, and she had a shock in her first week when they moved to Moscow. She was visiting a friend in the ghetto, and she was on her way home outside the ghetto after curfew, which was something she knew little about. She was arrested and spent a night in jail. That was it, as far as she was concerned.

She had already met my grandfather, who was a year older, about seventeen, and she showed him a picture of a steamship to America in the window of a travel office and said that she wouldn't marry him unless he found a way to get them over there. He was about to be subject to the draft, which was a seven-year hitch, and she felt stronger about that, too, than he did. So she pushed him to leave for America, where he made enough money to send for her to join him the next year, in New Haven, Connecticut. My father was born there less than a year after that, in 1889.

"The Jews should all convert," my father said to me once toward the end of his life. He had come to see the truth, of the teachings of Jesus and especially the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, and it was natural for him to hope that other Jews, and everybody else, should do the same. He was always preaching, at every

opportunity, though Christian Science doesn't have preachers, only Readers at its Sunday services, who read assigned passages from the Bible and the Science and Health. They do also have Lecturers, and I used to think that Dad had missed his real calling, to be a Christian Science lecturer. He was good at it, but above all it was his obsession.

"Metaphysical" argument was his passion. He would spring it on anyone, picking up on something they had said or he had overheard, in a streetcar or an elevator or standing in a line. It would start with an innocent question, the opening to a Socratic dialog, but it very quickly became a monolog, a lecture on the nature of reality, the practical implications for sickness and health of the goodness of God and the eternality of truth, principle.

He was unstoppable. He really could go on for hours, without eating or drinking, if you let him, and there was no way not to let him except to leave, which his family couldn't do. If you asked a question he always had an answer, he was impressive at that, and he would weave it into his narrative. But if you tried to interrupt with anything but a question, an objection or an attempt to change the subject, he would just ignore it and carry on. He was in a kind of trance, like his listeners after a few minutes.

[Fairly late in life I realized how much like him I had been

for years, on different subjects, the nuclear arms race or Vietnam or something I had just been reading and thinking about. An old man of the sea, the ancient mariner. Hard on a wife, especially my second wife whose father had had the same habit, and on children, and on acquaintances, anyone subject to it.

I didn't, like him, raise my hand with my forefinger extended to mark the points and hypnotize the hearer, but there was the same intensity, the fixed gaze, the lack of interest in dialog or interruption, above all the endlessness. The sense that I both conveyed and actually felt that I had knowledge to impart that the listeners lacked and desperately needed, whether they knew that or not, for their salvation in some sense or really, for the salvation of the country or the world.

It was interesting, what I was saying, people would say afterwards to explain why they had listened longer than they wanted to a monolog, till they became aware they were feeling trapped and oppressed. It was interesting but not, finally, what they really wanted to hear about at that moment, at such length. What they were describing about the later, prolonged, trapped stage, I recognized when I finally became aware of these reactions, was my father, the feelings of talking to my father, that is of being talked at by my father about Christian Science.

No one would have said they were really interested in hearing

him on that subject, so the feeling of being preached at and taken hostage would set in from the first moment. But that happened with me too, for people (like my wife) who had heard me on the same topics before. I had become my father, and at not a very great age. The differences in the subject matter and, it seemed to me, its immediate relevance for my hearers long concealed that from me. But my father, after all, had had the same feelings about the importance of what he was saying for his listeners.]

My grandfather, in faded brown pictures in my Grandmother's house in Denver, was short like my father, but slender and dashing, with a moustache and goatee. He was an intellectual, my father said, who had read all of Dostoevsky and Tolstoi and Chekhov. He looked like a lover, a ladies' man, and apparently he was. My father told me he knew he had two illegitimate brothers, sons of my grandfather and the wife of one of his business partners. After his first divorce from my grandmother he moved to Great Falls, Montana and got a bank loan to open a hardware store. It became the largest one in the city, till he abandoned it when he ran off with the banker's wife.

He was successful at a number of small-scale capitalist ventures, from a ranch for tubercular patients in Colorado to several small stores. He didn't really want his sons to go to college but to go into business, it was his wife that insisted they all go to college. But they were both radicals in politics.

According to my brother, they were not only anarchists when they came from Russia but "nihilists." But after the Russian Revolution they had become enthusiastic about the Bolsheviks, until later Emma Goldman had become disillusioned. Living with Grandmother after his own mother, my father's first wife, had died, he was introduced to her library of radical books, the Little Lenin Library. They were her first books in English.

When Dad was small his father had taken him once to hear Emma Goldman lecture at a large hall in Denver, and my father told me that his mother had always believed that he had had an affair with her. That wasn't hard to believe, considering Emma Goldman's views on free love and my grandfather's looks and interests. Twice my grandfather took my father with him, responding to a tip from somebody, to find Big Bill Haywood, the anarchist and founder of the Wobblies, drunk and passed out in a Denver bar, to help drag him home to sober up at their house. [I thought of that on my first trip to Moscow in the 1980's. Haywood is the first person buried in the Kremlin Wall.]

After his adventure in Montana he returned to Denver in mysterious trouble with the Mob, which would somehow be less of a danger if Grandmother married him again. She did, but before long he left again, asking her, my father told me, for nothing but a bus ticket and an overcoat. He saw my father for the last time in Chicago on his way West. My father said he worked in a logging camp in Oregon, but he committed suicide in a cheap hotel in Portland.

Until recently I had had the impression that my grandmother was illiterate into her thirties, when she learned to read and write in night school in Denver. Her large and unsteady writing in letters, like a child's, seemed to reflect that, along with her bad grammar and spelling. But my brother was amazed to hear I thought

that. He said she was just as much of an intellectual and a reader as her husband, but in Russian. It was English that she learned to write late in life, after being used to Cyrillic.

When I knew her she was short and dumpy, her hair in a bun, living alone in her early seventies in the small, musty house on Arapahoe where my father and his brothers had grown up. She took care of herself entirely and was preoccupied with her health and with making preserves. Her sense of the importance of health suggested to me where Dad had gotten his openness to Christian Science.

The only other thing she talked about was her son Ned, who had won an appointment to Annapolis, been first in his class, become an expert on salvage as a naval engineer. He was promoted to commander by Special Act of Congress in 1929 for his work raising the sunken submarine S-51 and initial work on the S-4. His book about raising the S-51, On the Bottom, was a Book-of-Month-Club best-seller, and so were half a dozen of his later books, historical novels and memoirs: Hell on Ice, about an ice-breaker ship trapped in the Arctic, and Under the Red Sea Sun, about his work in charge of salvage off Normandy and in the Red Sea in World War II.

I read all of them as a kid, copies that he sent to us inscribed appreciatively to his older brother, my father. Into my

thirties people hearing my name would regularly ask me if I was related to Captain Edward Ellsberg, the author.

Annapolis didn't accept "Ned" as a real name, they said it was a nickname, so he had become Edward. His brothers kept the names Harry and Will. The name "Ellsberg" must have been the real problem at Annapolis, there can't have been too many Jewish plebes before him. But was he Jewish? Well, yes, like my father, very like. He married Lucy Buck after graduating, a Christian like my father's first wife, and Will's.

But to my grandmother he was Ned, "My Ned," as she went on incessantly, tactlessly, to my mother about his latest achievements and letters and books he had sent her, never mentioning my father. Mother would try to bring up something about Dad and Grandmother would ignore it. She held up a picture of Ned's graduating class at Annapolis and said, in her thick Russian-Jewish accent, "First in his class!"

Mother flushed. She said, "But Harry was first in his class too!"

Grandmother dismissed that with, "Oh, yes, Harry." She carried on without pausing about another of Ned's exploits. Mother began to cry. A few minutes later she gathered up Gloria and me and hurried us out of the house.